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ABSTRACT

Recently a team of reading specialists from fourteen different nations completed a study in comparative reading with the aim of comparing literacy acquisition in countries with different cultures and languages in an attempt to derive new hypotheses regarding sociological, psychological, and linguistic variables in learning to read and write. Cross-cultural studies have shown the systematic relationship between the culture pattern of a society and the basic personality and mode of cognitive functioning of the children who are reared according to the social institutions in that pattern. This article discusses the differences in the value placed upon reading in several countries, the linguistic differences in learning to read in different languages, the varied sexual restrictions or customs in literacy education in the fourteen countries, and racial differences in reading instruction and achievement. The position of literacy on the scale of cultural priorities of the countries in the study is presented. And, finally, the cultural variation in the purpose of acquiring literacy is discussed. (TO)

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CULTURAL PRIORITIES AND THE ACQUISITION OF LITERACY

by JOHN DOWNING, University of Victoria, British Columbia

The Comparative Reading Project

Recently a team of reading specialists from 14 different nations completed the first study in a new field of inquiry – "Comparative Reading". The aim was to compare literacy acquisition in countries with different cultures and languages with a view to deriving new hypotheses regarding sociological, psychological and linguistic variables in learning to read and write.

The 14 nations selected to represent contrasts in culture, educational systems and language were: Argentina, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Hong Kong, Israel, India, Japan, Norway, the Soviet Union, Sweden and the United States. An expert on reading in each nation was asked to write a report on literacy acquisition in that particular country. Although some guidelines were provided, an important aspect of the method of inquiry was its open-endedness. It was hoped that this would permit spontaneous responses from the experts which would indicate the varying cultural priorities from one country to another.

The responses from the 14 nations are available verbatim in the complete report which also includes an analysis by the present author together with a review of previous major cross-national comparisons of literacy achievements.[1] This article focusses on only one aspect of the project – the way in which the value that a culture places on literacy influences its acquisition by children.

Cultural Influences in Literacy Development

Cross-cultural studies have shown the systematic relationship between the culture pattern of a society and the basic personality and mode of cognitive functioning of the children who are reared according to the social institutions in that pattern. But only limited evidence exists of the influence of cultural values and expectations on children's learning of literacy.

Evidence of social influences on the extent of literacy within cultures has been provided by Goody. For example, a common cause of restriction on literacy has been the preservation of secrecy as in religious or magical books. Goody concludes that "such restrictive practices tend to arise wherever people have an interest in maintaining a monopoly of the sources of their power".[2] He goes on to point out, "The situation of socially restricted literacy is often similar to the technological restrictions imposed

by non-phonetic systems of writing, where the sheer difficulties of learning the skill mean that it can be available only to a limited number of people."[3] Goody cites the Chinese writing system as an example of this cultural restriction on literacy. For instance, Cheng Ch'iao, the Sung dynasty (A.D. 960–1280) encyclopaedist, recognized that "the world is of the opinion that people who know ideographs are wise and worthy, whereas those who do not know ideographs are simple and stupid".[4] Goody concludes that China "stands as an extreme example of how, when a virtually non-phonetic system of writing becomes sufficiently developed to express a large number of meanings explicity, only a small and specially trained professional group in the total society can master it, and partake of the literate culture".[5]

The inertia of written language in comparison with its spoken form and cultural values seems to be a common problem. Thus, China today does have the national aim of universal literacy, but the Chinese writing system, which previously served the purpose of restricting literacy, is now regarded by many people as a hindrance to cultural aspirations. Mao Tse-tung declared in 1951 that "the written language must be reformed; it should follow the common direction of phoneticization which has been taken by the world's languages".[6] Chou En-lai also favors reforming the Chinese writing system. One important benefit he predicts is the unification of the Chinese subcultures through the standard Chinese dialect which the new alphabetic system would represent.[7] Diringer has called the alphabetic writing system democratic in contrast to other more restrictive systems.[8] Goody indicates that "the ease of alphabetic reading and writing was probably an important consideration in the development of political democracy in Greece".[9]

However, alphabets vary in their degree of alphabeticism. The Finnish alphabet is a highly consistent code for the phonemes of that language, whereas English orthography is much less regular in this respect. Furthermore, the complexity of English orthography is due in large degree to the inertia of the written language. If one considers the social history of England and the late development of a national goal of universal literacy there, the hypothesis that twentieth century aims in the English speaking countries are hampered by a writing system more appropriate for a policy of restricting literacy cannot be dismissed lightly. The lag between national goals in literacy and the development of the writing system may be a problem that differs only in degree from one culture to another. Where the language and writing systems are shared by several nations the lag may be more serious. For instance, the current "Right to Read" program of the United States may be seriously handicapped by a writing system

that was developed in England when this "human right" would have been vigorously denied in the latter country.

Such dramatic contrasts between cultures that restrict literacy and those that have the aim of universal literacy serve to alert us to the possibility of other less obvious cultural influences on literacy learning. The data collected in the "Comparative Reading" project indicate that different cultural priorities have important effects on the teaching of literacy. For example, the report by the expert on reading in Germany states that it is "not considered to be a serious problem". The report from Finland points out that in 1968 only 18 full-time special teachers were employed for reading disability cases. In Norway educators seem curiously detached from reading, almost as if it hardly occurs to anyone to be anxious about it. It seems to be generally believed that children just do not find it difficult to learn to read in these countries. The reports on Finland and Germany suggest comparative explanations for this, but, although these may reflect the facts, it remains possible that this lack of a perceived problem may be due to cultural attitudes toward literacy that do not stress its importance as much as other cultures do.

In marked contrast to the above are spontaneous comments about reading from some of the other national reports in the "Comparative Reading" study which suggest a greater display of national concern. The most extreme positive care for problems of literacy is found in the report on the United States. The American culture values the skills of reading and writing very highly indeed. The great majority of the world's research, scholarly articles, and theoretical and professional books on the topic of reading comes from the United States. The International Reading Association had its origins in the United States and Canada, and its permanent headquarters are in America. All facets of the child's educational environment that are influenced by American public educational agencies display the tangible results of a deep and extensive national concern for reading. The following extracts from the United States report are representative of this public anxiety:

> Reading was established as the educational goal of highest priority by former US Commissioner of Education Allen when he launched the Right to Read program as a target for the 1970s. ...
>
> Even more recently (1970), a National Reading Council was established to advise the US Office of Education and other government agencies on priorities in the Right to Read effort. Headed by a board of trustees drawn from many segments of society, members of the National Reading Council include representatives from business and industry, as well as from diverse professional and lay groups. The council is expected to direct and operate a National Reading Center whose primary purpose is to coordinate all the many activities ....

Within the past several years, the US Office of Education has allocated nearly $12 million for 257 separate reading research projects. Large additional sums have been invested in support of reading research through the Educational Laboratories and the Research and Development Centers.

The Japanese neuropsychiatrist Makita has proposed that the seriousness of the American reading problem may be caused by the difficulties in learning to read in the English language that arise from the complexity and perceived irregularity of grapheme-phoneme relations in its writing system.[10] Another explanation for the American anxiety about reading may be the problems of bilingualism and subcultural dialects in that country. Still another factor may be the economic prosperity that the United States has enjoyed. Americans may have had more resources available for investment in literacy.

The report on Japan also places a high value on reading. But this does not seem to arise from learning problems or failure. On the contrary, there is a sophisticated concern for problems that pass unnoticed in other countries. Whereas in Britain or America the term "non-reader" implies someone who *cannot* read, in Japan it is used for those who can but *do not* read. TV entertainment is seen as a serious cause of non-reading. Moreover the Japanese experts include "excessive readers" in their classification of children who are "problem readers". This suggests that difficulties in learning how to read are not necessarily the only or even the prime cause of a national emphasis on reading and writing.

In Great Britain, national concern for the problems of literacy standards has increased in recent years. Survey data quoted by the British report indicate that teachers believe strongly that not enough is being done, particularly in the training of teachers of reading. This is in a country with a sophisticated school system and comparatively high levels of literacy. In India, with its very different background, dissatisfaction has been expressed increasingly also by teachers, teacher trainers, and other educators regarding students' poor standards of reading, according to that country's report. Very great efforts are being made to improve these standards in the face of numerous serious difficulties of all kinds. Perhaps this should be contrasted with the situation disclosed by the expert in Argentina, a country which also is faced with great practical difficulties, but where concern and anxiety on a national basis appear to be less in evidence.

In France attitudes towards reading appear curiously ambivalent. Official pronouncements give high priority to the teaching of reading, for example, "The essential teaching at this age is reading. The first grade is, above all, a course in reading". However, official practical provisions seem

paradoxically inadequate despite research evidence of a very high failure rate. University concern for reading seems to be non-existent. Reading is neglected in the elementary school teacher's training. Little help is available from manuals or professional books on the subject. Remedial treatment for reading disability is scarce and undeveloped even where it exists. In this case, it seems that the declared high value placed on universal literacy is not paralleled by actions.

Sex Roles in Literacy Acquisition

The way in which literacy may be restricted to an elite class has been noted previously, but sometimes restrictions follow different patterns. Literacy may be highly valued in a culture, but it may be a custom that a certain part of the community is less in need of literacy than the rest. This discrimination is often along sex lines. Historically, in many European countries, girls received less literacy training than boys. Today this same trend still persists in many countries. Furthermore, there seem to be other cultural variations in differential attitudes toward boys and girls that may affect their literacy learning behavior.

The evidence on the causes of sex differences in reading readiness and early reading was reviewed recently by Downing and Thackray and they concluded that they are "not due to physiological sex differences. It is much more likely to be the effect of the different ways in which boys and girls are brought up and educated".[11]

American research and opinion almost unanimously agree that it is much more difficult to teach boys to read than girls. For example, in the United States 70 to 90 per cent of reading disability cases are boys. American studies of normal samples of the population show a similar advantage for the girls. Dykstra and Tinney compared 1,659 boys with 1,624 girls from schools in four areas of the United States, and their results clearly justify their conclusion: "This study yielded further support to the mass of evidence which demonstrates that girls have more advanced visual and auditory discrimination abilities at the readiness stage and are superior in reading ability, spelling ability, conventions of language (usage and punctuation) and arithmetic computation through the second grade".[12]

In France, too, at centers for reading disability treatment, referrals of boys outnumber those of girls. An investigation in Japan found more boys than girls were disabled readers. But little difference was found in their reading of the Kanji script.

The evidence from Great Britain is somewhat conflicting. Some studies confirm the American finding that girls are superior to boys in reading ability, but the carefully conducted official national surveys and Joyce

Morris' important investigation found, if anything, that boys were ahead. However, Morris did report that more boys than girls were placed in special groups for retarded readers.[13]

Statistics from Germany,[14] India and Nigeria[15] all show that a higher proportion of boys than girls achieve literacy. The cultural causation may be traced as follows. In the "Comparative Reading" report on India it is stated that "social causes are also an important factor in girls dropping out of school – betrothal, and the unwillingness of parents to send grown-up girls to a mixed school". In Nigeria, too, girls have poorer school attendance records than boys. As Downing and Thackray noted, in that country "if some chore needs doing around the homestead, the girl is kept at home to do it, while the boy is allowed to go to school".[16] The poorer attendance of girls at school in India and Nigeria than that of boys would explain the boys' superior achievements in reading in those countries, but the important point is that the girls' poorer attendance is determined *by cultural factors*.

This suggests the hypothesis that the opposite result in countries such as the United States may also have a cultural basis. It is commonly held that American boys are expected and thereby encouraged to spend more time and energy on large muscle activities, whereas sedentary types of behavior are thought to be more proper for girls. Furthermore, girls are expected to speak "better" than boys, and this "better" language is more like the formal "good" English found in their school reading primers. When an American father sees his daughter reading a book he is likely to approve, but if his son indulges too much in reading he is more inclined to query why he is not out playing a ball game. Yet another cultural factor is that American school beginners are almost exclusively taught by women, and boys may find it less appropriate to model their behavior on their woman teacher's. All these factors in American culture may readily account for the general superiority of girls in learning to read in the United States. At the very least, it seems clear that if there are any innate constitutional differences between girls and boys that affect their development of language and reading skills, they can be outweighed by other factors, as they must have been in countries like Germany, Nigeria, and India.

"Racial" Differences

"Racial" differences in reading achievement are also not necessarily determined by hereditary factors any more than are the differential attainments of girls and boys. The fundamental basis of the difference between the reading achievement of black as compared with white Americans, for

example, is much more likely to be subcultural. Black Americans have been given inferior educational treatment because they have been held to be unworthy of literacy. They did not "need" to be able to read and write for the low caste role in society for which they were destined. But, even today when their equal rights are more overtly recognized, the subcultural difference between black and white continues to favor superior literacy in the latter. While "standard" English is "good", black dialect is inferior, substandard, and even "wrong". This attitude is frequently reflected in teachers' behavior and instructional materials. The white Anglo Saxon's cultural and linguistic experience outside school is closer to the content and language used in teaching him to read. A serious disparity exists between the black child's experiential background and what he is expected to learn in school. Whereas the white Anglo is expected to learn to read and write his own language, the black child is, in effect, being required to undertake the much more difficult task of gaining his first literacy skills in a second language.

Thus, so-called racial differences in reading behavior actually reflect the powerful effect of cultural forces. Clearly, the black child's experience in learning to read must be quite different from that of the white Anglo child in the United States. Similar subcultural divisions are likely to be an important influence on literacy in other countries but usually the level of national awareness is much lower. The United States during the past decade has shown much concern for "disadvantaged" subcultures and efforts are being made to improve the teaching of reading in all minority groups. Such a strong concern for subcultural minorities is much less evident in most other countries, although it is clear that the same problem must exist, even if it is less serious in degree. Thus, minority-group membership may involve different experiences in learning to read in, say, Great Britain than in the United States.

Literacy in the Scale of Cultural Priorities

In three countries in the "Comparative Reading" project the teaching of reading is put in the perspective of the total ***mental health*** of the child. In Norway, great importance is attached to the child's "school readiness" (not "reading" readiness). Children who are not ready for school may not begin until 8 years of age. Even the normal age for admission is late compared with other countries (in Great Britain 5 is the legal age of entry and there are no school-readiness provisions). Children under 7 in Norway may apply to come to school earlier, but only after a medical and psychological examination. If they are found to be sufficiently mature for school work, they may be permitted to start school in the year they reach their sixth

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birthday. Norwegian educators emphasize also that school must give the child "a relaxed and cautious start" in reading. Similar attitudes seem to prevail in Denmark where grade I begins at age 7, and the principle applied at all levels is that the central concern must be the learner as a whole person, not some limited segment of his development, such as reading. School readiness is an important feature of education in Sweden, also. Seven is the normal starting age but, if school readiness tests show the child to be too immature for school, entry can be postponed until he is 8. Earlier entry is possible, but only in very unusual cases and only if the child has a tested developmental age of at least 7 years – intellectually, emotionally, and physically. The weight given to the basic motive underlying these practices in Norway, Denmark, and Sweden is indicated by the following comments by the Swedish expert in the "Comparative Reading" project:

> It is extremely important for the personality development and mental health of the child that the contact with the school be positive from the very beginning. . . .
>
> The school must allow them a calm and cautious start in reading. It pays to waste time by using a very quiet and slow tempo and a very careful and richly varied method in the early learning stages. Growth in reading cannot be hurried above capacity level without some fatal and far-extending effects. The total personality development of the child may be hurt.

While it is true that many psychologists and educators in other countries may agree with this Swedish recommendation, their views more often represent a minority opinion. For example, currently in the United States, there is increasing pressure to introduce *formal* instruction in reading at earlier and earlier ages in kindergarten or pre-school institutions. Furthermore, American school systems are ready to hand over responsibility for such activities to outside contractors whose financial profits are determined by the children's reading-test scores. This seems clear evidence of the remarkable difference in national educational values that exists between the United States and such countries as Denmark, Norway, and Sweden in this respect. Of course, there is danger in such generalizations and the present pressure for early reading achievements in the United States is opposed by some American educators. For example, Goodman writes ironically that "As long as the ends are spelled out in behavioral goals and the contractor promises to achieve these goals, never mind the bed-wetting, self-esteem, anti-social acts, or effects on other areas of learning."[17] However, such protests have not prevented "accountability" and "performance contracting" from spreading relentlessly in American education with little concern being displayed for the non-performance mental health outcomes stressed by Goodman.

In summary, despite individual differences in the attitudes of people within each nation, the fact remains that pressures on the child to learn literacy skills are much greater in some countries than others. There are clear indications that these pressures are based on cultural values. In the scale of values reading gets a higher priority in some cultures than it does in others. The risk of emotional disturbance due to pressure to learn to read at an early age is considered seriously in some countries but is more or less disregarded in others.

Social Aims in Literacy Teaching

The purpose of acquiring literacy is also subject to cultural variation. Such purposes may differ from time to time in the historical development of education within one country. For example, Staiger has shown how the aims of literacy changed within the United States. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries reading instruction was closely related to the Bible and religious materials, and from the end of the eighteenth century until about 1840 there was more concern for patriotic and moral behavior in children's reading. Neither of these purposes is much emphasized today.[18] However, they are currently related to reading in other countries. The purpose of Bible reading in Israel has great significance for reading instruction in Hebrew. The "Comparative Reading" report on Japan gives more space to the uses of literacy in moral development and attitude change than do most of the other national reports. In a special section headed "Influence of the Content of Books", topics such as "soundness of mind", "improving oneself", and "social behavior" are used in considering children's reports of books read "in the lower elementary school", for instance. In this connection it seems notable that bibliotherapy appears to have aroused greater interest in Japan than in most other countries. In India, cultural values and ideals are being carefully considered in the new reading materials being developed there at the present time.

Further evidence of cultural differences in the purposes of literacy learning is the lack of agreement among experts from different countries as to the technical definition of such terms as "reading" and "literacy".[19] The purpose of reading and the reader's conception of it have been shown to have an important influence on learning to read.[20] Therefore, these cultural variations in purpose cannot help but influence the child's experience of reading. They are likely to constitute an important variable in his educational environment.

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KULTURELLE PRIORITÄTEN UND LESENLERNEN

Das vor kurzem abgeschlossene Projekt "Vergleichendes Lesen" suchte nach universellen soziologischen, psychologischen und linguistischen Variablen in ver-

schiedenen Kulturen und Sprachen. Fachwissenschaftler aus vielen Ländern haben Beiträge dazu geleistet. Dieser Artikel konzentriert sich auf die kulturellen Einflüsse, die sich bei diesen Forschungsarbeiten ergeben haben:

(1) Die Bedeutung, die die einzelnen Kulturen dem Lernen von Lesen und Schreiben zuteilen, ist unterschiedlich. Diese Unterschiede sind hauptsächlich auf die Kultur und nicht auf den wirtschaftlichen Entwicklungsstand zurückzuführen.
(2) Unterschiede in der Leselernfähigkeit der Geschlechter sind kulturbedingt. Aus den Daten ist zu schließen, daß unterschiedliche Erfolge im Erlernen von Lesen und Schreiben bei Jungen und Mädchen vor allem durch die Rolle verursacht werden, die die jeweilige Kultur den Geschlechtern zuteilt.
(3) Rassenunterschiede in der Leselernfähigkeit beruhen nicht auf Erbfaktoren. Wenn z.B. schwarze Amerikaner einen geringeren Grad von Lesen besitzen als weiße Amerikaner, so ist dies in erster Linie auf subkulturelle Faktoren, vor allem Dialektunterschiede, zurückzuführen.
(4) Das Lesenlernen wird von den verschiedenen Kulturen auf der Skala der Bildungsprioritäten unterschiedlich eingestuft.
(5) Schließlich ist auch der Zweck des Lesenlernens kulturellen Verschiedenheiten unterworfen. Es wird daraus geschlossen, daß diese kulturellen Unterschiede die Leselernfähigkeit des Kindes beeinflussen mussen und einen wichtigen Einfluß auf seine schulischen Leistungen ausüben.

PRIORITES CULTURELLES ET APPRENTISSAGE A LA LECTURE

Le projet intitulé "Lecture comparée", que l'on vient de terminer, a recherché des variables universelles sociologiques, psychologiques et linguistiques dans différentes cultures et langues. Des spécialistes de plusieurs pays ont participé au projet. Cet article se concentre sur les influences culturelles que cette étude a permis de découvrir:

(1) Les cultures varient dans l'importance qu'elles attachent sur l'étude de la lecture et de l'écriture. Ces différences sont déterminées principalement par la culture et non par des différences d'ordre matériel.
(2) Dans l'apprentissage à la lecture, les différences entre les sexes varient d'une culture à l'autre. En se basant sur les résultats, on conclut que les différences dans l'apprentissage à la lecture des garçons et des filles sont causées surtout par les rôles sexuels qu'impose la culture.
(3) Les différences "raciales" dans l'apprentissage à la lecture ne sont pas déterminées par des facteurs héréditaires. Pour citer un exemple, si les Américains noirs ont un niveau de lecture moins élevé que les Américains blancs, ce fait est dû à des facteurs sous-culturels, et principalement à des différences de dialecte.
(4) La lecture est placée à différents niveaux dans l'étude des priorités éducatives des différents cultures.
(5) Enfin, le but de la lecture est aussi soumis à des variations d'ordre culturel. On en conclut que ces variations culturelles doivent influencer l'apprentissage à la lecture de l'enfant et constituent une influence importante dans son éducation.

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